

Fla.'s 'model' for fair elections under scrutiny

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SARASOTA -- Katherine Harris is staying out of the bitter fight over the election results in the race to fill her congressional seat.

But the contested race is likely to further cement her political legacy with election controversy. The same touch-screen voting machines Harris praised in 2001 as an end to Florida's embarrassing election problems are now under national scrutiny after recording an unusually high number of voters as skipping the race to replace her in Congress.

The meltdown in Florida's 13th Congressional District is in many ways a microcosm of the 2000 Florida election fiasco that put George W. Bush in the White House.

A tight race. A confusing ballot. Allegations of massive voter disenfranchisement.

"These guys in Florida _ embarrassingly _ just keep getting it wrong," said Ted Selker, co-director of the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project.

Harris and Gov. Jeb Bush touted electronic voting as the end of election woes in Florida, where hanging chads and other punch-card voting mishaps made the state a national joke in the 2000 election. Harris, then-Florida's secretary of state, was key in awarding a win to George Bush by a margin of only 537 votes. The Florida win gave Bush the presidency and made Harris a Republican star, but also created widespread distrust in the state's vote counting process.

Harris backed an election overhaul law passed in 2001 that outlawed punch-card ballots in favor of touch-screen devices or optical scan machines that read paper ballots. After the machines won certification in Florida in August 2001, her office issued a statement calling touch-screen computers "a significant leap forward for Florida's voting systems."

"Now we're the national model instead of the national concern. There'll never be a hanging, dangling or pregnant chad again," Harris said in 2001. Harris, who lost her bid for U.S. Senate, did not respond to several messages left this week by The Associated Press.

The chads are history, but so is any hope of discerning what almost 18,000 Sarasota County voters meant on Nov. 7 when they cast ballots in other races but skipped the race between

Republican Vern Buchanan or Democrat Christine Jennings.

The percentage of skipped votes is about six times higher than in the district's other counties, a statistic Jennings' cites in her legal challenge of Buchanan's 369-vote win. She has asked a Tallahassee circuit judge to order a new election.

"I think we actually are a step behind where we were in 2000 because then at least we had the ability to determine a voter's intentions," said Dan Smith, a University of Florida political scientist. He was referring to the hanging and dimpled chad that was often present on the punch cards. "That is not possible when there is no paper trail."

Buchanan's narrow victory was confirmed by two state-mandated recounts, but because most of the votes were cast on touch-screen machines there is no record of an attempt to cast a vote in the congressional race. Many residents said the machines failed to register their vote.

Jennings' suit alleges the machines malfunctioned. The American Civil Liberties Union and three other groups also cited the unusual undervote in a separate lawsuit.

"It's not a good situation. We want voters to have full confidence and faith in the system," said Aubrey Jewett, a University of Central Florida political scientist. "We are a lot better off (than 2000), but we're not perfect. There is still some work to do. It's not something that is solved, but something we have to continue to strive to do."

Kathy Dent, Sarasota County's elections supervisor, defended her county's \$4.5 million touch-screen system. Dent said she thinks thousands skipped the race to protest intense mudslinging by both candidates.

Political scientists say that kind of voter rebellion is unlikely to be confined to a single county. The high rate of skipped votes in Sarasota County is a statistical red flag.

"It would be almost impossible for me to believe that 13 percent of the voters in Sarasota County would intentionally skip that kind of high-profile race," Jewett said.

Another possible cause: bad ballot design.

Selker said the electronic ballot loaded on Sarasota's machines on Nov. 7 is the electronic equivalent of the 2000 "butterfly ballot" that confused many Palm Beach County voters. Each county designs its own ballot.

"This is a very old-fashioned interface," Selker said of the electronic ballot. "It just isn't very easy to look through and people just missed" the congressional race.

Selker said his push for a cleaner, more user-friendly design has been rebuffed.

Experts will delve into the guts of the computers next week when a state-mandated audit of Sarasota's voting system begins, but it remains unclear what they will find and how much access they will have to the copyrighted software that runs on the machines.

In recent weeks, Gov. Bush has made it clear he initially favored the optical scan system over touch-screen voting. But he also expressed confidence the touch-screen system is reliable.

"I am not concerned about the machines but I do think that the audit procedure that will start soon will identify what exactly happened," Gov. Bush said. "The fact is, these machines do give people a second chance to make sure that they didn't want to have their vote counted."
